

## **Thinking beyond general know-how**

By Ken Jacoby

Across the country, state highway agencies, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and industry partners are breaking away from the ordinary to make a difference in the way roads are built and maintained. These efforts were recognized last month by the National Quality Initiative (NQI) at a ceremony in Dallas, Texas.

NQI, which was formed in 1992 by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, various industry associations and FHWA, is dedicated to achieving quality improvements in the planning, design, construction and maintenance of the nation's highways. The "Making a Difference" awards recognize those in the highway community who have embraced this approach and set the bar for quality standards ever higher.

The four award categories are:

- Partnering—This award recognizes cooperative quality endeavors in such areas as highway design, construction and maintenance; material supply; subcontracting; and communications;
- Breaking the Mold—This category honors champions of new and innovative techniques and practices;

- Risk Taking—The award is given to those in the highway field who are taking intelligent and calculated risks to prove there is a better way than the routines and processes that currently prevail; and
- State Quality Initiative—This category recognizes the premier State Quality Initiatives (SQI) in the country. SQIs are collaborative efforts among a state highway agency, local industry organizations, and the local FHWA division office.

Gold, silver and bronze awards were given out in each category. Some of the gold award winners include Maryland, SQI category; the Texas Department of Transportation (DOT) and Washington State DOT and its partner Tucci and Sons in the risk-taking category; a coalition of New England state highway agencies and FHWA division offices, breaking the mold category; and a collaboration among Indiana DOT, Indiana Mineral Aggregates Association and FHWA's Indiana Division office, partnering category.

Washington State DOT and Tucci and Sons were deemed winners in the risk-taking category for their I-5/SR 512 Interchange Safety Improvements project. This project significantly reduced congestion at the southbound I-5 off-ramp to SR 512 by putting in place a set of three left-turn lanes. The triple left-turn freeway exit design is a first for Washington State.

Texas also was deemed a successful risk taker for its use of a "total maintenance and operations" contract for sections of the Interstate highway in its Waco and Dallas Districts. In this new type of contract, an expected performance

level is defined and it is then up to the contractor to determine what work needs to be done, when to do it and what materials and methods to use.

The New England state highway agencies and FHWA division offices were honored in the breaking the mold category for their work on the New England Transportation Technician Certification Program (NETTCP). This initiative has developed training and certification programs in a number of technical areas, including an asphalt binder laboratory certification program that is the first of its kind in the country and a concrete technician certification course. Certification by the NETTCP for technicians is now required by several New England states and is recognized by all of them.

Indiana DOT, FHWA and the Indiana Mineral Aggregates Association were recognized for their outstanding partnering efforts in establishing the Certified Aggregate Producer Program. This program has introduced a quality control/quality assurance specification for aggregates to improve the consistency of the materials used in construction.

Maryland's accomplishments in the SQI category include offering two work zone training courses for highway workers, increasing customer involvement during the preconstruction and construction phases of highway work and implementing a partnering program that has involved such groups as the Maryland Department of Environment, Maryland Asphalt Association, Consulting Engineers Council of Maryland and the Department of Natural Resources.

The award recipients were chosen by an NQI Steering Committee from nominees submitted by SQI Steering Committees and other officially recognized highway programs. The NQI Steering Committee includes representatives from FHWA, AASHTO, the National Asphalt Pavement Association, American Concrete Pavement Association, National Stone Association and other industry groups.

Along with presenting the “Making a Difference” awards, the Steering Committee introduced a new name for NQI at its November meeting: the National Partnership for Highway Quality. The new name emphasizes the organization’s focus on partnerships, as well as its continued objective of promoting quality improvements in the highway industry. The new name is also accompanied by an expanded list of goals. These include:

- Improving cooperation among state, federal and local agencies, academia and industry;
- Regularly identifying customer needs through national and state surveys;
- Championing the development and implementation of strategies that address customer needs; and
- Promoting safe highways and work zones through such measures as identifying and publicizing best practices and innovations, encouraging innovation and training and recommending improvements in benchmarking and evaluation.

The name may have changed, but the original vision of the NQI partners remains the same: To be the champions for continuous quality improvement of America's highways.

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